A TIME TO RETURN
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"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."
Matthew 2:12 (NRSV)

We come to you this morning, O God, returning from Bethlehem, to begin again where we left off. We come, grateful for what we have seen and experienced and for what has been given. Startle us again with the bright light of your presence in the life of the world and in our lives. And lead us, O God, by the light of your love: through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Dismantling and putting Christmas away has never been my favorite task. If truth were told, I try to avoid it and can be fairly inventive about not being available when the tree must be undecorated, the lights and ornaments replaced in their boxes, and then most depressing of all—and I never manage to avoid this because it is a two-person task—the actual disposal of the tree in a shower of dry pine needles. I'm far better at the other end of the process: much, much happier investing myself in the preparations, the getting ready, the buildup, the anticipation. Perhaps you've already done this necessary deed and returned your environment to normal. Perhaps today's the day, and you'll rush home to begin the sad task, which, at least, is not as depressing as having to watch the Bears lose another game.

A contemporary poet, Ann Weems—who, by the way, will be here this spring to lead a Lenten retreat—writes so winsomely about

> stuffing the Holy Family into a box
> in the aftermath of Christmas.

And what a joy it is to

> free them, each Advent,
> from a year's imprisonment
> boxed in the dark of our basement,
> out they come, one by one
> struggling through the straw,
> last year's tinsel still clinging to their robes.
>
> The child is first,
> His mother dressed eternally in blue,

Joseph holding valiantly what is left of his staff,
broken twenty years ago, by a child
who hugged a little too tightly.

Shepherds and three sheep in very bad repair are there.

And the Wise Ones still travel
though not quite so eloquently,
the standing camel having lost its back leg,
and the sitting camel having lost one ear.

Ann concludes—for a day like today—

And this year, when its time to pack the figures away,
We'll be more careful that the Peace and Goodwill are not also boxed for another year!
(from "Boxed" in *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems)

The rhythm of going to Bethlehem, lingering a while with the precious traditions, the generosity and goodwill, lingering in the lovely glow of the manger, and then returning to the normal, everyday world, is important—and it is difficult.

But that is exactly what people in the story itself must do. The shepherds, Luke says, didn't stay long at all. They had work to do. They told Mary and Joseph, or tried to tell, something of what happened to them on the hillside and then, Luke says, they "returned, glorifying and praising God."

The dynamic of return is at the heart of the story of the other travelers to Bethlehem. Wise men from the East show up in Jerusalem, at the royal palace, inquiring about the birth of a new king, which they assume logically has happened there in the palace—the new son of the current king, Herod. As a child I always assumed they arrived in Bethlehem at the same time as the shepherds, because they are such a dramatic part of every nativity scene and Christmas pageant. Actually, the story in Matthew's Gospel is a very different narrative with different meanings from Luke's story about the shepherds. We also assume that there were three of them. That comes from the legend and carols that give them names and a long tradition about them that includes not only their names but an apocryphal reunion they had years after the birth, at which they celebrated mass together, having become Roman Catholic by that time, and their death shortly thereafter, and their remains or relics, which are still kept in the cathedral in Cologne, Germany. All Matthew says is that there was more than one: maybe two, maybe ten. And the tradition of the church for centuries has been to celebrate their arrival in Bethlehem twelve days after Christmas, on Epiphany.

They come from the East, which means Persia (modern Iran) Babylon (modern Iraq) Arabia (modern Saudi Arabia), a provocative geographical metaphor in a time when we have declared two of the three part of an axis of evil and are looking with increasing suspicion at the third as the source of international terrorism as well as much of the petroleum on which we are dangerously dependent. They are Magi, part of a priestly caste of astrologers, dream interpreters, scholars. They are not kings, but Magi were often close to kings as trusted consultants. They are comfortable with people of power and influence. When they show up at the royal palace in Jerusalem, they receive and are given an audience with the king. They clearly are also people of means. They have traveled a long way, and they have brought with them very expressive gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

(You know, of course, the story that has appeared in every Epiphany sermon for the past few years—that if there had been three wise women and not men, they would have brought practical gifts, a casserole maybe, and being women they surely would have asked for directions and shown up on time.) The person who typed this rarely comments on the content but last week did say, “You’re not going to tell that again, are you?”)

They had seen a new star—for astrologers, a sign that a great event had happened, most likely the birth of a new king. What actually did they see? A comet, a supernova, or, as the Adler Planetarium explains, the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn and Mars, which in fact did happen between six and seven years before the birth. That convergence is bright and does look like a new star.

In any event, the entourage travels west because that is where the star appears every night in the desert sky. And their journey takes them to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, a people now ruled by Rome. There is still a Jew on the throne, a sort of puppet for Rome, which is the real authority and whose governor lives in Caesarea, an important port city named for the emperor. Herod the King of the Jews is himself quite a character. He is a strong leader (remembered mostly for the birth of a child in Bethlehem during his reign). He is also a good politician who knows how to balance the needs of his people and the reality of Roman power. He is also incredibly cruel, executing members of his own family to consolidate his power. And, of course, in a fit of rage, Herod will dispatch soldiers to Bethlehem to execute all the infants under the age of two—but that comes later.

For now, the entourage of astrologers, the Magi, show up at Herod’s palace inquiring about the birth. A fascinating suggestion is that because they were scholars, they were familiar with the religious writings of the Jews,

including the hope and expectation of the birth of a messiah. They may even have known about Isaiah's glorious prophecy:

> Arise, shine: for your light has come
> and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. . . .
> Nations shall come to your light
> and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

They may also have known Isaiah's suggestion that the way to observe the event is with gold and frankincense.

Herod doesn't like at all the Magi's suggestion that a new king, a competitor, a threat to him, has been born. Good politician that he is, however, he doesn't reveal his fear to his visitors but calls in his own consultants and asks the seemingly innocent question: "Say the Messiah was born. Where exactly do you suppose it would happen?" And the consultants are so eager to be useful and glad to have a royal question they can answer with certainty that they quote the ancient prophecy of Micah. It will be Bethlehem.

So Herod sends the Magi off down the road, about nine miles to the sleepy town called the House of Bread, where David's lineage began, with instruction to find the child and return with directions so Herod himself may go to pay him—his own replacement—homage.

Off they go and they find the child. It's not a very big town after all, and maybe they stop at the inn and begin to ask questions and discover that as a matter of fact there has been a birth, out back in the stable, and the couple and child are still there. So they find the child and are overwhelmed with joy and give their gifts, and they kneel down around the manger, these mysterious, wise, generous, perceptive foreigners. And then they return—not by way of Jerusalem, however, because by now they understand that Herod doesn't mean to worship a rival at all but to deal with him in a way consistent with his own former practices. So, Matthew concludes, "they left for their country by another road."

That's quite a story. There's a lot going on in it, just beneath the surface. For one thing, the Magi are Gentiles in a very Jewish story. Matthew, the New Testament scholars tell us, is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. Matthew assumes his readers know and understand Jewish law, Jewish custom, and Jewish religious practice. And here, at the very beginning, is a stunning story about non-Jews, Gentiles, pagans to be less fastidious about it, kneeling at the manager of the Messiah. Garrison Keillor, who understands the Bible and Christian theology, tells about a Lake Wobegon Lutheran pastor, Pastor Inquvist, who "singled out the Magi as particularly relevant to his congregation: 'because they are the only people in the

Gospel not singled out as Jews or Romans, they were the only ones who might, just might, be Norwegians.'" (See William Placher, *Jesus the Savior,* p. 54.)

One of the functions of religion historically is to draw boundaries: to define who is in and who is out; who's saved and who's not; who's going to heaven and who's not. The early Christian church's first crisis and first big argument came over the issue of whether or not non-Jews, Gentiles, could be included—an unthinkable concept for the first few decades of the Christian church. Religion historically has been used by its culture to define the other, the outsider, the enemy, the not chosen, the not elect, the infidel. In that regard, religion has played a supporting role in some of history's worst atrocities. Christian Crusades and Islamic Jihad's aimed at the other, the infidel; terrorists attacks and the murder of Christian medical personnel just last week in Yemen, a self-described act of cleansing the one, true faith; and popular Christian preachers in America labeling Mohammad as demonic and Islam as evil—all of it continues the tragic and now lethal dynamic. But here, at the Savior's birth, outsiders are included; pagans show reverence, express joy and generosity. Here at the very beginning of the story old and deeply held convictions about ethnicity, race, religion are all transcended, overcome in the light of this one who is Lord of all, God's Son, who expresses, more than anything else, God's universal love, God's inclusive love, God's passion for the reconciliation of the whole human family. It's a holy scandal. To the consternation of his own people, and to our continuing consternation, this Jesus doesn't seem to know an outsider. To our everlasting discomfort, this Jesus is far more interested in including society's—and religion's—marginalized than he is in keeping sinners or infidels out. And in this time of deepening cultural and religious hostility and the lethal violence it fuels, there is no more important task for Christians and Muslims and Jews than sorting out exclusive faith claims in the light of their evil potential—for Christians, a task illuminated by this picture of these outsiders, three wise Arabs—kneeling at the manger.

And here at the beginning of the story, we see how this child will judge and challenge and disturb the status quo. Everyone knows that Herod is king, that real authority lives in the royal palace, that real power resides in having more swords and armor than anyone else. Everyone knows that our security and well-being as a nation will result from our overwhelming military might and for that we will be willing to spend our resources and the lives of our young men and women. Everyone, that is, except these ones the Bible calls wise; these ones who are first to experience the power of vulnerable love; these ones who are first to worship a king who serves, a king who gives life away in love; these wise ones who might teach us that generosity and compassion and justice will, in the final analysis, contribute more to our peace and security than our overwhelming military superiority.

And here at the beginning of the story, we learn that the road back from Bethlehem is different from the route by which we came. Transformation happens when you kneel at the manger. Peter Gomes calls it an encounter with the possible in the midst of the impossible. And the road ahead is now characterized by great joy—because we have seen God in a newborn child—and generosity—because we have experienced the promised blessing of giving instead of receiving—and hope. It's the hope that transforms us from accommodation of the status quo to holy impatience and holy work for the kingdom God has planted in our midst in that stable and its manger.

It's a different road from Bethlehem. For some it will result in a whole new destination. Having seen the light shining in the darkness, the old reality will no longer do. Dramatic, decisive change—in attitude, outlook, in relationships, in vocational goals—is now necessary. But for most of us, and this is more difficult, the road back from Bethlehem ends where it began and now we must begin again where we left off a few weeks ago when the journey started. The world is the same place, the threat of war is still very much present, the equalities in our own society continue to divide and alienate. Our primary relationships are the same, and most of us returned to the same job last week. Most of us must return to duties and responsibilities to take up where we left off.

What is different, of course, is us. For in precious moments we have seen the light, which shines in the darkness. In significant moments of revelation we have seen the precious holiness of human life, now forever blessed by the child's birth into it—our own lives, the lives of the persons with whom we live and whose lives we share, the friends and colleagues with whom we work and play; and the others, the outsiders who are no longer separated from us in the light of the manger.

What is different is us—we who have been to Bethlehem and seen the child and now know the reality and truth of God's love, and now know that more than anything else, deep in our heart of hearts, we want to be his followers, his men and women, for as long as we live.

"It's not over this birthing," Ann Weems writes:

> There are always newer skies
> into which
> God can throw stars.
> When we begin to think
> that we can predict the Advent of God,
> that we can box the Christ
> in a stable in Bethlehem,
> that's just the time
> that God will be born

in a place we can’t imagine and won’t believe.
Those who wait for God
watch with their hearts and not their eyes,
listening,
always listening
for angel words.
*(*from “It’s Not Over” in *Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems)

Thanks be to God.

Amen.